

Vulnerablism: Notes on Poetry and Ethics

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The question isn't is art up to this but what else is art for?
—Charles Bernstein, "Report From Liberty Street"¹

Here's an attempt to sketch out a political ethic, and to tentatively project a poetics based on it.

"Vulnerablism" is an orientation rather than a position.

The term's near-unpronouncability matches the partial, primarily possible existence of what it denotes and the attempt to articulate its content in response to questions that come insistently to mind.

9/11/01 opened a narrative, and the demand that one support the "war on terror" appeals in turn to a demand for narrative closure. The story will end in a state of total security, and the process that's to take us there (through so many distracting subplots) involves rigorous administration of "justice", pre-emptive defense, and a bold display of invulnerability.

A refusal to be represented in terms of this demand, or to parrot the architects of such representation, a rejection of the desire for this closure, a freely chosen, resolute affirmation of one's vulnerability—these seem to me to be crucial responses to the events and the discourse of the present.

Especially in light of the fact that absolute security is impossible, even given the utter eradication of "our" "enemies."

These responses also seem humbly reasonable. Vulnerablism as an antidote to paranoia, removing the latter's condition of possibility (the fear that drives the narrative, unrelenting).

The near-unpronouncability of "vulnerablism" in the mouth of the president. Saying the word "terror."

The fear of losing the argument, the need to save face—these rot human interaction on every scale. Listen to any lovers' quarrel; spend an hour reading a few poetry listservs.

Vulnerablism is a refusal to live in accordance with the set of alternatives: fear or resignation.

Perforating the walls of one's own sphere from the inside, rendering borders permeable, opening up to a real circulation in which the particularities of the outside need not be reduced to the terms of the inside. In the present global situation, permeability is one-way (western capitalism and its cultural categories can move into other spheres and transform them, but any reverse traversal is converted into western capitalist currency).

A being's unique ways of changing in encountering what's outside it are essential to that being's particularity.

¹ in Bernstein, Charles. *Girly Man*, Chicago 2006.

In an argument, authority (knowledge and experience) becomes authoritarian when it's employed for the sake of winning the argument (a goal that has nothing to do with knowledge and experience).

Or when power relations that no interlocutor has put in place pre-determine the way authority will function in that context.

Vulnerablism, in rejecting the "win/lose" dichotomy, could block the first set of dynamics and loosen the rigidity of the second.

A vulnerablist project: to de-privilege privilege without sacrificing passion, dedication and knowledge to an ideology of sameness and agreement.

(Turning an argument into something on which we can all agree, erasing differences, is nothing new, produces nothing new, and is often a dirty rhetorical trick).

Any proposition's incompleteness and provisionality.

Vulnerablism is meant as a way of situating a desire for social change and an opposition to current politics. Therefore, it cannot mean the renunciation of strong ethical commitments.

A lack of principles tends toward its own form of *invulnerability*, where nothing threatens because nothing is at stake.

(Vulnerablism is not the openness to having arguments with people for whom nothing is at stake and whose motivation is the undermining of care).

Vulnerablism doesn't reject answers, but emphasizes their impermanence; it favors making things questionable.

Tentative and temporary answers *can be* worthy of strong and passionate commitment.

Vulnerablism opposes the fetishization of permanence and the demand for the ultimate.

The point is not to solve all problems, but to try to find problems that are more interesting, more fulfilling to solve, and less deadly.

The vulnerablist tends to side with fragility (itself a form of protest).

That which requires thoughtful attention, quiet patience, fully voluntary care, can be easily drowned out and annihilated by anything that proclaims itself loudly and with ease. The very existence of delicate people, artworks, social possibilities, puts fear into question.

Note: none of this is meant to exclude other kinds of political ethics. The injunction, "don't win" isn't meant to displace "Si, se puede!"

Mass solidarity is also fragile.

The vulnerablist doesn't exclude his siblings. One of the most important of these is the questioning skeptic, who opens things up from the outside as the vulnerablist does from the inside.

Without ethical commitment, the vulnerablist becomes the dispenser of apathy, while the questioning skeptic becomes the aggressive nihilist.

An ethical principle is not a (single, available) ethical position.

A collection of principles may form a structure or system, and this may attach to a position by virtue of sympathy, overlap, or even identity.

Commitment is not position.

It may mean a *positionality*, a tendency toward the temporary adoption of some favored positions², in response to specific contexts that give these positions meaning, in conjunction with principles and—more importantly—with the experience of desire.

What's at stake is not the correctness of our principles, but the value and possibility of what's wanted.

Desire is the active part of ethics, the “verb” to the principle's “noun.” The temporality and concreteness of ethical *experience* takes precedence over fixed meanings of principles and positions.

Vulnerablism doesn't reject generality. A commitment to social change requires an ethics, and a generality-free ethics would deny similarities between different situations (just as a strong normative morality would deny their differences). It wouldn't be an ethics at all. The context that gives meaning to an action is always larger than a single event.

It does, however, emphasize the crucial place of particulars (people, situations, thoughts, sentences, constellations of problems and objects) and the way in which they call into question the comprehensiveness of any generality.

The individual and the whole are vulnerable to one another; this is a relation of mutual need.

Vulnerablism welcomes negation, which is always open to the rejoinder, “what do you have that would replace this?” This is a rhetorical trick or philosophical confusion that conflates two types of negation: the one that merely posits a polar opposite to something (and thus remains in the framework of what's negated) and the one that, in refusing to immediately supply a single positive alternative, opens up the whole range of possibilities blocked by that framework.

Frequent misgivings about political commitment:

The committed individual becomes “preachy,” as if they know all the answers.

Commitment can function as an ideological cosmetic, exempting a person from criticism by virtue of the appearance of ethical uprightness.

Politics is always too big, always foreign to us; concern with the political measures existence in accordance with principles that don't fit the developing, day-to-day processes of our lives.

The urgency of these principles turns them into dogmas that drown out other kinds of meaningfulness.

Vulnerablism—which rejects the thesis that commitment is inherently flawed—might offer some ways of addressing these discomforts.³

² The vulnerablist neither adheres to party lines nor abhors the idea of agreeing with them; the drama in which one makes oneself look independent by rejecting any notion that smacks of group agreement is just as suspect as “mob mentality.”

³ It needn't, of course, accept these formulations of discomfort as they stand. One trap the vulnerablist can fall into is the attempt to satisfy every critic; this ends up blocking the emergence of new perspectives and formulations of new problems.

They're more or less the same discomforts people have with political poetry, so perhaps vulnerablism offers possibilities there as well.

The dangers are worth taking seriously (which, again, doesn't necessarily mean accepting their formulations as definitive): the risk of "preachiness," the sacrifice of linguistic invention and intervention for the sake of established "political" rhetorical tropes and kinds of tone, a programmatic control of the poem's development, and the use of politics as "icing" to make the poet look ethically concerned.

The structure of most arguments about the possibility of political poetry goes something like:
X claims it can't be done well.
Y keeps doing it anyway.

It's clear that writing good political poetry is hard, but the claim that poetry and politics are essentially opposed is a sigh of resignation that wants to make itself universal.

One can see the difficulty of problems as an index to the potential for something new.

What might vulnerablism poetics look like?

Propositions, where they occur, would be seen as intrinsically related to questions. These might be opened up when the proposition answers another question—or the question might be, "to what questions could this proposition be the answer?"

There might be a poetry composed entirely of questions and things coming into question.

Vulnerability involves risk. Vulnerablism poetry, therefore, will never be fully consistent, complete, or self-sufficient. It may feature an aesthetic of disruption, in which the internal logic of the poem is methodically sabotaged, or in which its modes of consistency are called into question. A mis-fit of kinds of language, varieties of tone, vocabularies, levels of discourse. Formal irregularities. The plain and the elaborate, the prescriptive and the self-referential, rhetorics and styles of radically distinct appearances inhabiting the same work.

Vulnerablism opens. There are various kinds of "open text," each with its own particular set of motivations.⁴

Working with a proliferation of local juxtapositions rather than moving teleologically toward the return to a state of rest, the text that rejects closure is about transitions, different ways of moving between particulars, modes of behavior and thought that change in response to new events. Rather than a central meaning, it has many: those of its parts (any of which might be the center)

⁴ The idea of the "open text" has become vague in the way literary terms often do when they move away from their sources in literary practice and become common rhetorical counters in acts of criticism. This essay isn't the place to adequately particularize the varied types of "openness," but I wanted to point out the need for this respecification, as I find the open text a valuable notion whose expanding possibilities are in danger of being blocked by a usage divorced from practice. Let it suffice to state what should be obvious: to say that a text is "open" does *not* mean that its meanings are "entirely indeterminate," that the reader "makes the meaning out of nothing," though it does mean that the text allows for a proliferation of meanings within and between readings (the open text lacks an ultimate, fundamental meaning).

and those made by the different parts functioning as momentary contexts for one another. Reading and writing this kind of poetry can be a training in flexibility of thought, a way of making explicit the ordinarily unconscious ways in which we synthesize experience and a weaning of oneself from the demand for completed narratives.

This kind of text emphasizes a general openness, a freedom of movement. Another focuses on the “open to—,” motivated positively by a desire allow the widest possible variety of materials and perspectives into the poem⁵.

Then there are poetries of open questions, of doubt, of silences where answers would be. Two different models for this:

Brecht’s later poems turn from a dialectic in which the synthesis, even where repressed, is quite clear (we know full well what the poet’s answer is) to one in which the end of the poem leaves us in a profound tension whose resolution calls for an answer on a level that’s truly qualitatively different from the one on which the questions were posed.

In Fanny Howe’s poetry, doubt and faith are essential to one another and mutually vulnerable by virtue of this interdependency. Being an embodied self is a highly charged problem. Suffering (one’s own and that of others) is experienced as coming from both inside and outside; the self becomes permeable in the face of doubt and pain and is thrown back into isolation by them, back and forth. The undeniability of pain and uncertainty render resignation nonsensical, motivating a restlessness that continuously meets with unanswered and unanswerable questions.

There are plenty of other kinds of open text. Here I just want to point out, without elaboration, the difference between “openness” as a property of a text and *opening* as a process, an action that a poem might perform as part of a reading of it.⁶

Humor, which can become a form of protection against the gravity of a problem or an easy dismissal of it, can also function as an active opening device. As an antidote to fear, it shows problems to be less monolithic and impenetrable than they might initially appear. The kind of humor that results when surprising connections are made is particularly valuable to the vulnerablist; it shakes things up from the inside.⁷

⁵ Here one could contrast the desire to “let it all in” with the drive to “*get* it all in.” In terms of the great modern and postmodern long poems, the latter is Poundian—*The Cantos*’ capacity seen as “having the biggest box,” within which the heterogeneous is to be synthesized—while the former characterizes Robert Duncan’s *Passages* and Zukofsky’s “A”, where a dazzling range of heterogeneous materials leaks into the poem, linked at most by an abiding musicality. These individual characterizations are debatable, but the distinction is (I hope) clear.

⁶ The distinction between the “verbal” sense of a concept and its “nominal” and adjectival senses is philosophically important. Lyn Hejinian’s recent books make this distinction their philosophical starting point; for example, rather than asking “what comes first?,” the question is “what is beginning?,” and the infinitive form leads to the questions, “who begins?” and “what is a beginner?”. This makes for a consideration of concepts in relation to concrete experience and a development of them in relation to particulars, rather than determining them in advance for explication in the poem. I imagine a work that applies this kind of poetic-philosophical thinking to questions that are primarily political.

⁷ Bob Perelman’s recent *IFLIFE* (Roof, 2006) is a wonderful example of “proto-vulnerablist” satirical poetry. While losing none of the sharpness of wit and critical observation of Perelman’s prior work, these recent poems are characterized by a particularly elegiac tone. In *IFLIFE*, sadness counteracts the tendency of humor to safely distance the satirist from his subject matter; the book’s ethical stance (protest, laughter, disgust and mourning

The matter of satirical poetry brings to mind Kent Johnson's much-discussed book *Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz*, but I want to discuss two poems from that book not in terms of humor, but in order to point to a poetic gesture that seems intuitively appropriate to vulnerablism and to address the problems with that gesture. The move I'm thinking of happens in some of the best political art: the "I" of the poem (or song or play) implicates itself as culpable in some way for the atrocities it abhors.

The title poem of Johnson's book is written in six paragraphs (with an epigraph and a final sentence), each of which has the form: "(greeting), (possible Iraqi name), I'm an American (boy/girl), (list of biographical characteristics), (statement of impending honesty), (description of acts of torture or humiliation to be inflicted)." The addressee is always a prisoner of the U.S. military, and the speaker a soldier—until the last paragraph:

HI THERE, Madid, I'm an American poet, twentyish, early to mid-thirtyish, fortyish to seventyish, I've had poems on the Poets Against the War website [...] and I really dig Arab music, and I read Adorno and Spivak, and I'm really progressive, and I voted for Clinton and Gore, even though I know you bombed them too [...] and I know I live quite nicely off the fruits of a dying imperium, which include anti-war poetry readings at the Lincoln Center and the Poetry Project [...] I'm going to box your ears with two big books of poems, one of them experimental and the other more plain speech-like [...] and I'm going to do it until your brain swells to the size of a basketball [...] I want you to take this self-righteous poem, soak it in this bedpan of crude oil, and shove it down your pleading, screaming throat.⁸

Johnson's poem is uncompromising in its condemnation, and no-one is exempt. At the same time, the closing move seems too easy. Everything is tied up so well that the poem becomes a gesture of pre-emptive defense. The poet indicts himself and all other progressively-minded poets and intellectuals—so no-one can accuse the poem of self-righteousness (especially once the poet himself has taken care of that). The absurdity of the image of the poet killing a prisoner with books of poetry lends the section just enough humorous distance. While the exaggeration (this situation has never happened) is meant to emphasize the claim of culpability, it also has the function of taking the poem even more over-the-top than it has been, amplifying its rhetorical force and making a statement that's expertly developed, powerful and complete. The poem is made safe from accusations by internalizing them. I think the poem cites a number of difficult problems by *absorbing* them, rather than working out their particularities from the inside.

"When I First Read Ange Mlinko," in the same volume, centers around a different performance of culpability that makes these problems thematic. Johnson describes an idyllic scene, reading poetry upstairs at his home, preparing to have a barbecue with his wife, seeing a flock of birds landing on the jacarandas outside. He suddenly remembers an article describing the incineration of four girls "by a missile fired from a pilotless drone" (p.17), and then writes

interwoven, resonating with each other without combining into bitter humor or mocking protest) seems appropriate to the "war on terror."

⁸ Johnson, Kent. *Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz*. Effing Press 2005, p.37.

I know/ it's possible that I thought this then so to suggest my moral sensibilities to you, using a tragedy that is not mine to give some moral pressure to a poem/ that/ up/ until/ now/ hadn't/ been/ about much at all. I admit/ I am not sure myself! [...] and no matter how self-reflexive I get, or/ how suspicious you become [...] those [...] kids/ will/ still/ be/ dead/ and never thought about again, by you or anyone.⁹

While "Lyric Poetry" has all the confidence of a fully adequate statement through the very relentlessness with which it attacks itself, "Ange Mlinko" allows questions to remain open. Rather than identifying the poet directly with the violent oppressor, this poem shows an ethically problematic situation constituted by the poet's distance from that oppression (which comes to him in his house through the mediation of the news). Doubt charges the space between domestic life and larger social roles, and in the separation and tension between them it's not clear what's of ethical significance. The poet first throws his own authenticity, reliability and moral character into question, goes on to cast doubt on the relevance of that question in relation to the materiality of the dead girls, and finally comments on the inadequacy of these very gestures of self-doubt. It could be argued that this move simply adds one step to the gesture of "Lyric Poetry," but I think the destabilizing effect of these doubts is allowed to operate in "Ange Mlinko" without being resolved formally and rhetorically the way it is in the former poem. The pre-emptive, apologetic gesture is called into question in a way that doesn't negate it, but allows its problematic to occur within the poem.

Without mentioning it, I've been jumping from one scale to another and applying the notion of vulnerability to each in the same way. There's the affirmation of the vulnerability of a nation and that of individuals, vulnerability to physical harm and to the destabilization of one's perspectives; in poetry, there's the vulnerability of the poet (and the poet's arguments and opinions) and that of the poem (which breaks down further into opennesses of form and content). I've applied the term specifically to political ethics and to social and poetic circumstances that aren't primarily "political" in the usual sense. Hopefully, this will be justified as conceptual generality rather than vagueness, but this pretty much has to be worked out in practice. All that can be done here is to see if the lines I've thrown out can at least be gathered in summary.

The vulnerablist poem operates on multiple levels simultaneously. It contains direct examination of, or reference to, political problems and questions, but these don't constitute a central meaning. Political content is treated as an index to questions and problems, not as a self-sufficient argument. The poem juxtaposes direct political statements with "alien" language; this could include statements of a similar form that contradict or question the others in their content, as well as all kinds of language that may or may not have any propositional function and, in particular, may imply a criticism of the limits of "political language." Elements from disparate contexts bang and rub up against one another. The internal logic of the poem is vulnerable to outside influence. When materials enter the poem, they are transformed by the formal context and the proximity of other materials; at the same time, the workings of the poem itself change in response to these new elements. Materials that semantically, sonically, or categorically clash with the way the poem has been developing are allowed to alter that development, often radically, so that the poem's tentative whole is generated from the frictions of its parts; any argument within the poem is then likely to change its status and meaning. To put this last point

⁹ *ibid.*, p.17.

more plainly, vulnerablist poetry can never be about single “issues,” since its composition allows for the inclusion of heterogeneous elements (including other “issues” and things that aren’t “issues”) without their subsumption under one umbrella concern. The vulnerablist poet achieves this partly through the intentional sabotage of consistencies, which amounts to a *need* for the heterogeneous.

In its content, the poem often thematizes doubt and fragility, especially in relation to the compositional point of view. This will often mean that the poem treats the compositional subject (an “I”) directly, showing the partiality and tenuousness of an ethical and aesthetic perspective. Here it’s a staging of the *movement* or *process* of doubt that’s essential. The doubt has to happen in and through the poem, rather than simply being cited (for example, in confessions of the poet’s culpability). The activity of the disturbance of categories needs to be performed by the poem itself in order for the reader to take up an opening, questioning stance (this can happen without direct treatment of an “I” as well). This means that the work as a whole can’t have a formal or rhetorical sense of completeness and self-sufficiency—even if its content represents an encyclopedia of uncertainties—because that completeness would contain and limit the *effects* of the poem; the desire is that these effects resonate outside the text. Besides the sabotage of consistency mentioned earlier, the poem may employ humor, negation, unanswered questions, extremes of contentiousness, radical parataxis, and other methods to prevent the thinglike wholeness of the poem from overshadowing the events that take place in any reading of it.

Does a vulnerablist poetics as I’ve sketched it here solve the problems with political poetry listed above? Probably not, except through some of its negations. If it’s to be truly contributive, the consequences of any poetics can’t be worked out directly in relation to such familiar questions; they have to be seen at work, in engagement with all the risks of aesthetic and political failure that come with untried territory. Much of what I’ve written here is therefore provisional. At the same time, I’ve tried to come up with some ethical and poetic proposals that target the ways in which we generate truth and value (desire) in language. It’s in language that things take on the significances for us that they do, and poetry seems like one place to interrogate the workings of this, to uncover the ways in which our perspectives and positions might be too solidified, or be dictated by motivations that prevent what we’d otherwise desire, and to render these open to intervention. The miniscule degree to which poetry can ordinarily influence the course of large-scale events is obvious. At the same time, poetry is one ideal staging ground for rehearsals of new ways of thinking, some of which (particularly when one is asked to open oneself to the risks of harm and error) require a safe environment in which they can be initially tested and explored. It’s precisely the fact that poetry is *not* politics, that it’s always at least one step away from immediate need and external struggle, that makes it a potential source of new possibilities, to be heard from time to time in the silences between the insistent beats of triumph and rectitude.

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